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Catholic Council for the Spanish Speaking

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"THE EFFECTS OF THE BRACERO PROGRAM IN CALIFORNIA"

Rev. Donald McDonnell  
San Jose, California

California in land area is the second largest state in the U.S.A. - second only to Texas. In population California with thirteen million people ranks second only to New York. But in farming California is first, averaging over two and one-half billion dollars in farm cash receipts yearly. In 1956 the net farm income was two billion eight hundred and nineteen million dollars. (Note: the handling and processing of raw farm products provided an additional 5.7 billion to California's economy.) It is the nation's leading producer of fruits and vegetables. California is first in the production of almonds, apricots, avocados, sweet cherries, dates, figs, grapes, lemons, olives, peaches, pears, plums, prunes, walnuts, artichokes, asparagus, broccoli, sprouts, cantaloupes, carrots, cauliflower, celery, honeydew melons, lettuce, strawberries and tomatoes. Over 153 different major crops are produced. (Aside: with the label stamped on the crate MADE IN CALIFORNIA - BY TEXANS.)

Yet farm people make up only 3.3% of the population of California and only 5% of the farms (by the 1954 agricultural census 6,248 of 123,074 farms) control nearly 75% of all the cultivated land of California. With such few farm people, how is it possible for California to produce such an immense volume of crops requiring such intensive hand labor?

The answer is migratory labor. In the last 80 odd years (1870-1958) since California changed over from grain and grazing to fruit and vegetable production, it has had a history packed with the importation of many groups to work the fields:

70,000 Chinese (1870-1882)  
56,000 Japanese (1880-1920)  
31,000 Filipinos (1920-1930)  
175,000 Mexicans (1917-1930)

During the last depression there was an interlude of the vast migration of thousands of the Anglo-American dust-bowl refugees into California (1930-1941) and the return to Mexico of hundreds of Mexican families with their U.S. born children. Next came the wetback invasion ending in the mass deportation drive of 1952-3. In the last fifteen years there has been a steadily increasing importation of braceros.

In 1957 there were imported into California under Public Law 78 178,944 braceros of the total of 436,000 brought into the U.S. Braceros worked in 42 of the 58 counties of California, for 11,611 different farmers belonging to 55 major Farm Labor Associations. They inhabited more than 5,000 widely scattered labor camps.



### Spiritual Care

The five dioceses of California have sent priests into these labor camps to care for the spiritual needs of the men. The response is tremendous. About 95% attend Mass and when given opportunity 1/4 to 1/2 go to confession and communion.

Since 1950 the Archbishop of San Francisco, Most Rev. John J. Mitty, has set up the Missionary Apostolate - which has as part of its work assigned the care of the braceros in the labor camps. The first objective of the Missionary Apostolate has been to provide for each bracero the opportunity to attend Mass at least once during the season. There were in 1957 325 Masses offered in 246 labor camps of braceros and of some 35 parishes with Mexican nationals nine had Sunday night Mass with a Spanish sermon. 32,300 different individual men attended Mass at least once in their own camps, whereas the average total attendance at the Sunday night Masses in the churches was 1,770. About 2,550 men went to confession and received communion at least once. It might be mentioned here that the most effective means of covering the labor camps has been offering the Mass on the week-day evenings in the camps themselves, with the men resoundingly singing the Mass hymns. When we find them we even invite the protestant evangelizers to come, and they learn to sing O MARIA, MADRE MIA.

Despite this heartening response we are seriously concerned about the bracero system for two reasons: (1) the pastoral care that the Church can give cannot overcome the demoralizing effect of the bracero life itself, (2) there is mounting pressure being brought to bear upon the legislature to make the importation of braceros permanent by striking out the expiration date of Public Law 78 or extending it indefinitely and to use braceros not only for seasonal work but also for the permanent year round jobs in agriculture.

(California Senate Joint Resolution Nov. 16 - March 10, 1958 - Relative to an extension of Public Law 78.

- 1 WHEREAS, California leads the Nation in the number and
- 2 value of its commercial crops; and
- 3 WHEREAS, Many of these crops are highly specialized and
- 4 have a short and critical harvesting period; and
- 5 WHEREAS, Large numbers of farm workers are needed to
- 6 handle, cultivate, and harvest these crops; and
- 7 WHEREAS, There are insufficient domestic farm workers in
- 8 California to perform these functions; and
- 9 WHEREAS, Mexican national farm laborers, admitted to this
- 10 State under the provisions of Public Law 78 of the Eighty-
- 11 second Congress, have met California emergency farm labor
- 12 needs, thereby preventing losses to the State's basic industry
- 13 and segments of the State's economy associated therewith;
- 14 now, therefore, be it
- 15 Resolved by the Senate and Assembly of the State of Cali-
- 16 fornia, jointly, That the Legislature of the State of California
- 17 respectfully memorializes the Congress of the United States
- 18 to make-a-simple-extension repeal the termination date of
- 19 June 30, 1959, contained in Section 509 of Public Law 78; of
- 20 the Eighty-Second Congress, as amended; and be it further
- 21 Resolved, That the Secretary of the Senate be hereby
- 22 directed to transmit copies of this resolution to the President
- 23 and Vice President of the United States, to the Speaker of
- 24 the House of Representatives, and to each Senator and Repre-
- 25 sentative from California in the Congress of the United States.)



At the present time there are some 300,000 unemployed people in California and 5 1/2 million unemployed in the U.S.A. (Some of them are hitchhiking from San Francisco to San Antonio and others from San Antonio to San Francisco.) Many of these would take jobs in agriculture even at the prevailing rate in California of 85¢ to \$1.00 an hour.

Therefore these questions have persistently come into the minds of many of the priests serving the Spanish speaking people:

1) Is the primary effect of the bracero system the continuation and entrenchment of a system of labor-management relations that is fundamentally contrary to the Church's clear teachings on Social Justice and Charity?

2) Does the unnatural way of life of the bracero resulting from the system demand the positive moral guidance by the Church of the conscience of the various parties involved?

Following the guidance of the 7th and 8th Regional Conference of the Catholic Council of the Spanish speaking (1955-6) and the Recommendations of the Annual Policy Statements of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference (1956-7) and the deliberations of the Convention of the Bracero Chaplains of California (1957), Father Alan McCoy, C.F.M., of Old St. Mary's Church, Stockton, wrote this letter to several leading moral theologians. The following is the text of the letter of Father McCoy and the reply of Father Francis Connell, C.S.S.R.:

ST. MARY'S CHURCH  
203 E. Washington Street  
Stockton 2, California

April 2, 1958

Very Rev. Francis J. Connell, C.S.S.R.  
Catholic University  
Washington, D.C.

Reverend and Dear Father:

I am writing to ask your opinion on some of the questions arising from the Mexican national program. Many of the priests in the agricultural areas of California are affected greatly by this and it was felt that if some group such as the Bishops' Committee for the Spanish Speaking could formulate a very definite policy it would help us in dealing with Catholic farmers.

The Mexican national or "bracero" program, as you know, is supposedly inaugurated to supplement the supply of American farm laborers. According to the law, it is not allowed to bring in braceros unless there is an evident need due to a lack of domestic help. However, we find that, connected with the program there are the following evils whose existence is substantiated by many studies made by priests working with the braceros and by laymen.

We find that the program fails seriously against social justice in the following manner:

1) It depresses the wages and conditions of our own farm workers. Statistics show that where a large number of braceros are brought into an area the wages for all workers in the area go down considerably.



This in spite of the fact that the law provides that the braceros be paid the prevailing wage in any particular area. It has been found impossible to check this in such a way as to assure a living wage or anything approaching a living wage for the agricultural workers themselves.

2) This program creates labor pools of men disjointed from society. These men, the great majority of them married, are disassociated from their families in Mexico and are kept in labor pools on reservations resembling our military reservations and, even when they are actually working for a particular farmer, are segregated from the society of the surrounding area.

3) This program creates very harmful competition for jobs, - not only among the Mexican nationals themselves, but in relation to our own American labor force.

4) The program all but eliminates the possibility of true organization on the part of our American workers. Since the braceros do not have the opportunity of organizing and dealing with the farmers through their duly elected representatives, the farmers are tempted to deal with them and to call upon them rather than upon American laborers. Consequently, the American laborer has no force in his bargaining.

5) The bracero program devalues the labor of the farm family. A small farm of the family type is not able to compete with the larger farms that can bring in braceros and have a ready pool of labor on their own conditions.

6) This segregates people, since the Mexican nationals have practically no contact even with the American Mexicans living in our agricultural towns.

7) These nationals are denied a family life. Conjugal rights and responsibilities are abandoned for the time of their bracero program. Many of the men are away for a period of a year, some for two years. The Bishops of Mexico clearly point out that this is breaking up innumerable families in Mexico. Out of some 2,500,000 men in the program, 1,000,000 have failed to return to their homes since the program was inaugurated, - this from the statement of the Mexican hierarchy.

8) Nightmarish conditions obtain in the contracting centers in Mexico itself. Poverty is extreme, robbery commonplace and health hazards are innumerable. This is born out by statistical study made of these centers and reported by the Bishops' Committee for Spanish Speaking in 1955.

Coming to the moral life of the bracero, we see first the harm to his religious life. It is true that due to the fact that very few priests are able to go to the labor camps, the bracero has in most instances no opportunity for Holy Mass or confession either on the road or in the camps here in California. Then, labor on Sunday is the usual thing in the labor camps, even though it be not absolutely necessary. These Catholic Mexicans are subjected to a great deal of proselytizing on the part of Protestant groups. And the defection from the Faith has been quite considerable.

Secondly, we have the neglect of family responsibility by the bracero. As mentioned above, the Mexican bishops point out that a great number of them have deserted their families. Moreover, since the children of the



family depend so much upon the guidance of the fathers, especially during the adolescent years, this has contributed a great deal to the increase of juvenile delinquency in Mexico itself.

The vice of gambling, which is prevalent in the camps has led to the impoverishment of the family of the bracero in many instances. In his personal life, the bracero is subjected to a great pressure in regards to drinking. There is continual danger from the widespread prostitution in the camps, along with other vices which arise when men are unnaturally separated from their families. There is a great lack of recreational and social programs.

Finally, tastes and habits are cultivated here which cannot possibly be continued in Mexico without divorce from their home surroundings. The consequent breaking up of the family has been perhaps the greatest evil in the moral life of the bracero.

In the supposition that these facts be substantiated, I would like to ask your opinion on the following:

- 1) Under what conditions would a Catholic farmer be permitted to hire braceros?
- 2) What must be the attitude of the Catholic farmer towards the program?
- 3) Does a Catholic farmer who is in this program have an obligation to work towards a reordering of the agricultural order which seems to necessitate this program?

The meeting of the Bishops' Committee is scheduled for San Antonio, Texas, April 15th, 16th and 17th. I would greatly appreciate having your answer by April 11th, if this is at all possible.

With every best wish and thanking you for considering these questions, I am

Sincerely yours in Christ,

FR. ALAN MCCOY, O.F.M.

Washington, D.C., April 7, 1958

The Rev. Alan McCoy, O.F.M.  
Stockton, Cal.

Dear Father McCoy:

I am not familiar with the particular situation of the braceros, which you describe in detail. However, in view of what you have said, I would answer as follows to your questions:

(1 - Under what conditions would a Catholic farmer be permitted to hire braceros?)

1. I believe that, apart from very extraordinary circumstances, a Catholic farmer would not be allowed to hire braceros, since the program itself has so many evils connected with it. I say "apart from very extraordinary circumstances" because I could imagine some rare cases in which this might be permissible--for example, if a farmer simply could not get American workers, and he would have to suffer a grave



financial loss, and perhaps even complete ruin, if he could not get workers. But, even in that event, he would surely have serious obligations toward the braceros. He would have to pay them the prevailing living wage, he would have to take active measures to protect them morally (against prostitution, gambling, etc., in the camps), above all, he would have to give them opportunities of practicing their religion, by bringing them to church, getting a Spanish-speaking priest to visit them if possible, etc.

To repeat, however, such exceptions should be definitely exceptions. Per se, the Catholic farmer, if he wishes to be consistent with the principles of social justice and charity, must simply refuse to participate in the program as it is now being conducted.

(2 - What must be the attitude of the Catholic farmer towards the program?)

2. I believe that this has been already answered, for practical purposes. The Catholic farmer should be definitely opposed to the program and refuse to take part in it, even though such participation might be very lucrative--apart from such exceptional cases as I described. But, in addition, I believe that the Catholic farmer has a positive obligation to work for a reordering of the program, if these braceros are going to be brought in.

(3 - Does a Catholic farmer who is in this program have an obligation to work towards a reordering of the agricultural order which seems to necessitate this program?)

3. This brings us to the obligation of positively promoting social justice; and I most definitely say that there is such an obligation on the part of all Catholics, within their particular fields, to work for an adjustment of conditions in line with Catholic principles. In other words, Catholics should know that they are not fulfilling their duties as Catholics if they merely abstain from inflicting wrong on society; they must also work toward the reign of social justice and charity. This means that the Catholic farmer, whatever his own practices may be (I mean, even if he is perfectly just in his own transactions) must do what he can to help his fellow men get the benefit of the Church's teachings on industry and labor. From this it follows, I believe, that in the situation you describe, presuming that the bracero program is going to continue in some form, every Catholic farmer should work toward its reordering, so that it may be in accord with justice and charity. Of course, this means that some definite directions as to the proper procedure to be followed toward this objective should be given by ecclesiastical authorities.

I hope this statement will be helpful. As I said in the beginning, I am not familiar with the particular situation, but presuming your description is accurate, I believe that what I have stated follows as a logical conclusion.

Sincerely in Christ,

FRANCIS J. CONNELL, C.S.S.R.

Very Rev. Francis J. Connell, C.S.S.R.

Are there any suggestions for the reordering of the system of agricultural labor to make it conform with social justice? Here is a suggested outline that may be of some help.



### What do we look for as the solution of the problem of farm labor?

Farmers put their produce into the system of the American economy. Therefore they must pay the wages and benefits that the American worker is entitled to. Otherwise American workers of necessity will be driven out of agriculture and the total labor supply will be imported labor gangs.

The only other remedy would be another depression or national misfortune so that American workers in desperation would be driven to underbid each other's wages to work on California farms.

As a good pattern of industrial relations, we look for a system that would parallel the construction business. Contractors would have a legitimate place in the farm system, demanded by the need of estimating each year by competitive bid the labor requirements of various crops, but they could not underbid one another by underpaying the workers.

### Legal Contractors' Agreements

The farmers who did not wish to act as their own labor contractor could call for competitive bids from farm work contractors, united in a farm contractors' association, having written agreements with the workers associations. Since the agreements would be a matter of public record and legal documents, there would be the establishing of ordered peaceful labor relations.

The workers would receive the wages and benefits that would provide valuable additional purchasing power for our economy. The highly skilled workmen such as the operators of farm machinery and pruners, would receive the special recognition and pay that their classified skill and training deserves.

Foreign workers, if needed, could be absorbed into our economy by normal immigration without building up a camp system of captive labor gangs of men, and without the braceros sacrificing their family life on the altar of the American dollar, and disrupting normal American labor relations.

Although it might take many years for men of good will on all sides (managers of farm corporations, independent farmers, contractors, workers and government) to construct such a balanced and well ordered farm system, this is the positive program of organization and mutual cooperation called for by sound Catholic social principles.

At the present time there is being formed in California an association of agricultural workers. Listen to the names of the charter members of San Joaquin Local #334 of AFL-CIO NAWU (National Agricultural Workers Union): Jose Ledesma, Ysidro Rodriguez, Donaciano Ortega, Juan Torres, Samuel Marin, Margarito Ortega, Cruz Alonzo.

In their meeting halls the picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe is enshrined. She is their Queen. They carry her picture in their wallets. On the other hand there are already formed and have been operating for many years the gigantic multi-billion dollar growers associations--in many of which Catholic growers play a considerable role. Will Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Mother of the Lord of Heaven, bring together and unite as brothers these two groups--the people of the land who seek to work in accordance with the dignity of their human nature and the powerful



economic interests that control the agriculture of the state. We pray that she will, so that the good order and the peace of the kingdom of Christ may reign, and the land and its people may give glory to God. But it is not enough to pray. This is a time for action.